ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
AND
4(f) EVALUATION
FOR
KENNEDY CENTER ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS
WASHINGTON, DC

Prepared pursuant to 42 U.S.C. 4332(2)(c)
by
U.S. Department of Transportation
Federal Highway Administration
Eastern Federal Lands Highway Division

October 10, 2003

Cooperating Agencies

The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
The National Park Service
The National Capital Planning Commission
The Commission of Fine Arts
The District of Columbia Department of Transportation

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9-30-03
Date of Approval

Note

The *Kennedy Center Access Improvements Environmental Assessment* is designed to be read in conjunction with its companion volume, entitled *Kennedy Center Access Improvements Environmental Assessment – Technical Information*. Neither volume is a stand-alone document.

The *Kennedy Center Access Improvements Environmental Assessment* contains the text of the Environmental Assessment. The *Kennedy Center Access Improvements Environmental Assessment – Technical Information* contains accompanying figures, plates, technical appendices, and the Section 4(f) statement.

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Environmental Assessment and 4(f) Evaluation
Kennedy Center Access Improvements
Washington, DC

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Executive Summary

The Federal Highway Administration, in partnership with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the District of Columbia Department of Transportation, The National Park Service (NPS), the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC), and the Commission of Fine Arts, is proposing to improve access to the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. The proposed action would include both transportation and urban design improvements. On September 18, 2002 the President signed the *John F. Kennedy Center Plaza Authorization Act of 2002*, which authorized the appropriation of $400 million for capital costs incurred in the planning, design, engineering, and construction of Kennedy Center access improvements for fiscal years 2003 through 2010.

Purpose and Need

The Kennedy Center's proximity to regional highways and transit facilities contributes to the Center's success in drawing visitors and patrons. However, compromises made to accommodate the Center on its site between the Potomac Freeway (I-66) and the Potomac River have resulted in access conditions that make the final leg of a journey to the Center challenging, particularly for those on foot or bicycle. Access problems include:

- Nearby roadways are congested during the evening pre-performance period.
- The Potomac Freeway, E Street Expressway, and Rock Creek Parkway, while providing good access for motorists to the Kennedy Center, also isolate the Center.
- Roads around the Center are heavily used.
- Parking at the Center is often inadequate.
- Pedestrian and bicycle access to the Center and to the Potomac riverfront is indirect and often unsafe.
- Transit access is not convenient.

This environmental assessment (EA) analyzes the potential environmental impacts of implementing either of two action alternatives – Alternatives 4 or 4V – or the No Action Alternative. The EA has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, the Council on Environmental Quality's Regulations for Implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal

Regulations [CFR] 1500-1508), and the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) *Environmental Impact and Related Procedures* (23 CFR 771) and *Guidance for Preparing and Processing Environmental and Section 4(f) Documents* (FHWA Technical Advisory T 6640.8A, October 30, 1987). FHWA will select a preferred alternative following the public review period.

The Proposed Action

The proposed action would improve pedestrian, bicycle, motorized vehicle, transit, and water transport access to the Kennedy Center as well as create an urban design setting for the Kennedy Center that emphasizes re-connection of the Center southeast to the National Mall, east to the White House and downtown, and northwest to the Georgetown waterfront. To facilitate analysis and design for each alternative, the study area was divided into three sectors: North, Center, and South. Improvements proposed in each sector include:

North Sector:

- A direct connection between the Rock Creek Parkway and the Potomac Freeway to relieve the congested Rock Creek Parkway/Virginia Avenue/27th Street/Potomac Freeway intersections.
- A section of the proposed pedestrian/bicycle trail connecting the Georgetown waterfront with the Rock Creek Parkway Trail from the bridge over Rock Creek to the Rock Creek Parkway Trail.
- Intersection improvements for pedestrian safety at Virginia Avenue/Rock Creek Parkway and at Juarez Circle.
- Reconstruction of 27th Street from K Street to Virginia Avenue, including new sidewalks.

Center Sector:

- A deck about four to seven acres in size (depending upon the alternative and the final design) that would include space for parking beneath, a plaza on top, and two new Kennedy Center buildings – an education center and a rehearsal and office building – extending east from the Kennedy Center atop the Potomac Freeway and the E Street Expressway to Virginia Avenue.
- A pedestrian connection from the Kennedy Center's River Terrace to the Potomac River pedestrian/bicycle trail, along with a wharf and a floating boat dock for river access.
- Extension of 25th Street south onto the deck, providing a linkage to the north.
- In one alternative (Alternative 4), removal of the E Street Expressway eastbound ramp to Virginia Avenue and widening of the E Street Expressway tunnel to accommodate the re-routed traffic.
- Pedestrian sidewalks along the new grade level E Street, on the proposed deck, and north along 25th Street to Juarez Circle.
- At the south end of the Kennedy Center, a new pedestrian signal for crossing Rock Creek Parkway.

- At the north end of the Kennedy Center, improvement of the existing signalized pedestrian crossing of Rock Creek Parkway.

South Sector:

- To relieve congestion at the Ohio Drive/Potomac Freeway/Rock Creek Parkway intersection, a new bridge over Ohio Drive for Potomac Freeway traffic (Alternative 4) or realignment and signalization of the intersection (Alternative 4V).
- Two new pedestrian/bicycle trails: one that would connect the southeastern edge of the proposed plaza with the National Mall; the other would connect the Roosevelt Bridge walkway with the Rock Creek Parkway Trail and the National Mall, passing over the Potomac Freeway on a structure. An unsignalized pedestrian crossing would be added where the latter trail connects with the Rock Creek Parkway Trail.
- Modification of the ramp linking eastbound Roosevelt Bridge to southbound Ohio Drive and northbound Rock Creek Parkway via the Potomac Freeway by moving the buttonhook west of its current position and building a dedicated lane to allow traffic to enter the parkway without having to merge.

Impacts

Land Use, Plans, Economics, and Neighborhood

The proposed action would have long-term beneficial effects on the urban design setting of the Kennedy Center, transportation system access, and the District and regional economy. Long-term direct and indirect economic benefits would accrue from new employees who would work in the two proposed Kennedy Center buildings on the plaza. The proposed action would fulfill a number of plans for the study area, notably NCPC's *Extending the Legacy* and *Washington Waterfronts* plans. Other than minor changes in land use directly associated with the project, that would be compatible with existing land uses, no change in study area land use or zoning is expected. No development, other than for the proposed Education Center and Rehearsal and Office Building, is expected to occur because of this project.

No residences or buildings of any kind would be displaced by the project. There would be positive effects on the nearby Foggy Bottom neighborhood as pedestrian and bicycle access in the study area would improve, the Potomac Freeway and E Street Expressway would be partially covered by landscaped plazas, and the Kennedy Center Show Shuttle would use the new grade level E Street to reach the Center, rather than neighborhood streets.

Transportation System

Access to the Kennedy Center by motorized vehicle, on foot, by bicycle, by public transit, and by boat would all be much improved over existing conditions if the proposed action were implemented. Congestion problems in the study area would be relieved, and safety both for motorists and pedestrians and bicyclists would improve. Travel times for pedestrians and bicyclists would improve. Pre-performance period levels of service at study area intersections would improve dramatically. The supply of parking would expand to more closely match the Kennedy Center's parking demand.

Cultural Resources

The proposed improvements would have no effect on nearby historic architectural resources if project elements were designed in a context-sensitive manner. Study area viewscapes would change, with most changes expected to be positive. While a small amount of National Park Service (NPS) parkland adjacent to existing park roadways would be taken for these improvements, more parkland would be created by demolition of old roadway than would be taken. Because nationally recognized archaeological sites are present in the North Sector near the proposed improvements, further studies would be undertaken during the design phase to ensure that the proposed connection between Rock Creek Parkway and the Potomac Freeway would minimize harm to known and suspected archaeological sites. A memorandum of agreement among FHWA, NPS, and the District of Columbia State Historic Preservation Officer will address work to be done to further identify the sites and to establish procedures to minimize harm.

Natural Resources

Construction of a wharf and floating dock would cause temporary disturbances of the river bottom and nearby waters and would require water quality and navigation permits. Boat traffic in the immediate vicinity of the Kennedy Center likely would increase, particularly if a water taxi service were instituted by others. This increase is in line with NPS and NCPC plans for the waterfront. Shading from the proposed wharf and dock would negatively affect a bed of submerged aquatic vegetation that now occupies the river bottom, but this bed represents only a small amount of similar vegetation in the river. FHWA is consulting with the National Marine Fisheries Service about ways to minimize harm to the endangered shortnose sturgeon, which might occur in this part of the Potomac River. Some landscaping near road and trail improvements would be removed, but new landscaping would be provided. Some of the proposed improvements would be located within the 100-year floodplain, but no displacement of flood storage capacity is expected. Where applicable, the proposed facilities would be designed to accommodate flooding.

Utilities

Both action alternatives would require moving utility lines and lowering large sewers, which would be planned in conjunction with the applicable utility companies.

Air Quality and Noise

Implementation of the proposed action would result in no significant impacts to local or regional air quality levels. The project would conform to the Clean Air Act transportation conformity rule. Noise levels predicted for both action alternatives in 2025 would result in no significant (6 decibels or greater) increases above existing conditions. Under the No Build Alternative and both action alternatives, the predicted 2025 noise levels would approach or exceed FHWA's 67-decibel noise abatement criterion at many receptors tested; most of the exceedances expected by 2025 would occur even if the proposed action improvements were not built. Given the developed urban environment of the project area, there are no feasible or reasonable mitigation measures, such as noise barriers, to mitigate traffic noise impacts.

Kennedy Center Operations and Management

The proposed action would benefit the operation of the Kennedy Center: a new parking garage under the deck would alleviate the current parking shortage; the deck would create space for two new buildings for the Kennedy Center: an education center and a rehearsal and office building; access improvements would make it easier for visitors and patrons to reach the Center as well as reduce the Center's isolation; and the improvements would improve the aesthetic setting of the Center. The new education center dedicated to the performing arts would draw new visitors to the Kennedy Center, in keeping with the mission of the Center.

Hazardous Materials

Contaminated soils from previous industrial uses of the land around the Kennedy Center might be uncovered during construction. Mitigation measures to minimize risks during construction would include soils testing to determine proper handling and disposal methods, and the use of soil and erosion control measures to minimize the possibility of contaminated stormwater runoff reaching the Potomac River.

Construction

Construction of either action alternative would create short-term, localized, negative impacts on traffic patterns, noise levels, and air quality. Available mitigation measures, such as rerouting traffic, pedestrians and bicyclists, would minimize many of these potential impacts. The construction period for the entire project would last approximately ten years, but construction activities would focus on a particular area during each stage of construction.

Please address all comments to:

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Comments must be postmarked no later than November 10, 2003

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